

MARTIN BALOGE

CREM – Catholic University of Lille, Lille, France



NICOLAS HUBÉ

CREM – University of Lorraine, Metz, France

France: Two Separate Populist Parties; Two separate networks and One Go-Between Group¹

This article proposes a literature review of existing works on the use of social networks by the populist parties in France, showing that they are part of the extension of a very different political history in both cases. French populists are divided along clear ideological radical left – radical right lines. The conflict is highly personalised. It heavily relies on social media – in part as a result of criticism of bias on the part of legacy media. Especially J.L.Mélenchon seems to be rather innovative and active in using many social media platforms and novel approaches to communication even when comparing at international level. The results show that the FB pages most shared by the two populist leaders were FB pages related to themselves, their party or other members of their organization. The shared links corresponded to the ideological orientation of the two leaders. We therefore study in detail the populist galaxies online, as a sign of the existence of two opposing political traditions that do not rely on the same networks.

Keywords: Facebook, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, LFI, Marine Le Pen, FN/RN, populism, right-wing party, left-wing party, network analysis, media, France

Introduction

The study is focused on information sources shared on Facebook (FB) and the networks of selected populist leaders representing populist parties (terminologically further specified) in France in two periods in 2020. The two politically relevant selected populist actors are Jean-Luc Mélenchon from *La France Insoumise* (Indomitable France, *LFI*) and Marine Le Pen, leader of the *Rassemblement national* (*RN*, *National Rally*, formerly, until early 2018, known as *Front National* – National Front, *FN/RN*) respectively. Looking at the international expert survey (Meijers – Zaslove 2020), in the 2018 Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) *LFI* reached 8.5 magnitude of populism on a 10 points scale (the key discursive indicators: Manichean,

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indivisible, general will, people centrism and antielitism, and clearly located to the left of the political spectrum – radical left), while *FN/RN* reached 9.07 degrees of populism and clearly standing on the opposite ideological pole – radical right. However, it should be remembered that the *FN/RN* is characterized above all as an extreme right-wing party, even more than a populist one, making the themes of immigration, national preference and Islam the core of its ideology. Thus, by looking in detail at populists' radical right/left social media discourse in comparison with that of non-populist candidates, we may be more nuanced: populists radical right/left are not always only populists and/or do not defend the same ideology (Maurer – Diehl, 2020).

This paper proposes a complementary insight into the ideological explanations of party attitudes. It aims to investigate the ideological and political roots of two French parties and the way they address the electorate: the Front National/Rassemblement national (*FN/RN*), the “prototypical populist” (Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 34) and oldest institutionalized extreme-right party in Europe; and the new left-populist Front de Gauche/France Insoumise (*FdG/LFI*), created during the “new momentum for left-wing populism” of the Euro crisis (Ibid, 37). Both parties contributed to the “electoral earthquake” (Cole 2019, Gougou – Persico 2017, Rouban 2018) in the French party system during the last presidential elections. Four parties concentrated 84.9% of the votes during the first round. Emmanuel Macron ended up 2.7% ahead (with 24.01%) of Marine Le Pen (21.3%). The difference between the second position and the fourth position, held by Jean-Luc Mélenchon (19.6%), was only 618,540 votes among the 31,381,603 French voters.

We have chosen to focus our analysis on FB network because FB is the most popular social platform, and moreover its users represent wide selection of society (Duggan et al. 2015). It also allows more types of interactions (Trieu et al. 2019) than for example Twitter. In France, 74% of internet users also use FB but only 28% of them used Twitter in the second half of 2018 (Global Web Index 2019). Unlike Twitter, FB does not have a character limitation, allowing users to develop longer arguments and affording more space to an extended populist discourse (Ernst et al. 2017). As shown in the table below, the very high degree of personalization of French political life, where leaders have more followers than their party, encourages us to focus on these elected officials rather than on their political organization. It should also be noted that the *FN/RN* is the most followed French party on FB, ahead of the party of the President of the Republic, Emmanuel Macron, and his *La République en Marche* (see table 1).

Table 1: Number of followers on Facebook among the main French politicians and their party (January 2021)

	Individual	Party
Jean-Luc Mélenchon (LFI)	1 227 100	217 119
Marine Le Pen (FN/RN)	1 613 262	450 167
Emmanuel Macron (LREM)	3 840 839	250 311

Source: Own compilation based on FB publicly available data

Previous work have shown that we are dealing here with two leaders labelled under the category of populist developing different strategies in routine and campaign time (Baloge – Hubé

2021). Indeed, while both refer to the people in similar proportions on FB, none of them really tries to define in an ideological or philosophical way “the people”. Above all, Mélenchon criticizes more often national and international political elites, while Le Pen refers more frequently to “others” as enemies of the people. Additionally, it seems that populism is a “political communication style of political actors” (Jagers – Walgrave 2007, p. 322) used by both political actors differently. For Jean-Luc Mélenchon, populism is the preferred style during a campaign but that has to be less used during the routine period. On the contrary, the process of “de-demonisation” of Marine Le Pen and her party is a campaign strategy: the populism is much more milder during this period. But when she’s less into the media loop, she’s much more populist in her FB public positions.

In politics, to complement Austin’s theory, “to say is to do”, i.e. to make people believe that one can do what one says, and in particular to make known and recognize new principles of division in the social world (Bourdieu 1983). The presented study aims to understand not only their direct communication, but the way they are using a two – or multiple step flow of communication. Talking to their electorate is not only a matter of discursive stance but is only a matter of using some media with whom activists can identify themselves (Baloge – Hubé 2021). Following the same line, we aim to understand how connected populist leaders are with some followers. Taking into consideration that these two parties are often linked by the populist label, and in the same time that they oppose each other on almost everything, several issues emerge, our research question is to understand how the online populist French galaxy is characterized. Is this ideological and historical differentiation also found online by the constitution of two distinct networks? What do these online networks tell us about the populist strategies of the two parties? Our central hypothesis, in light of the literature and the history of the parties, is that populist networks are also characterized by a form of online differentiation. The hypothesis is that their followers are more radical than the leaders. Before that, review of previous related research seems to be useful for contextualisation of our findings.

Social Media and Populists in France – A Research Review

In France the correlation between populist, anti-establishment candidates and heavy reliance on social networks as communication tools is very strong (Villeneuve 2020). The *FN/RN* was the first party in the country to put up a website in the mid-1990s. From 1994, the party owns a website (after having used telephony or first computer tools for its purposes). The party quickly invested and became professional in its use of these networks. It will be the first party in France to open an office in the virtual universe Second Life, in 2006 (Dezé 2011). Since then, it has invested aggressively in its social media operations. *FN/RN* has been well-known for its digital prowess, aggressively launching online campaigns that included viral hashtags, memes, and animated videos. Similarly, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, demonstrated a similar social media pre-eminence, with a YouTube channel hosting some videos with over 5,000,000 views and a FB following of over 900,000 in 2017. Furthermore, Mélenchon fans even created a video game, *Fiscal Kombat*, where players took on the oligarchy by chasing after rich men and redistributing their

wealth (Hendrickson – Galston 2017). Mélenchon is also one of the first politician in France to launch a twitch channel, a social media particularly popular among young people. For Mélenchon, the electoral strategy is to capture the young educated digital citizens. La France Insoumise used also the Russian application Telegram and Discord to communicate discreetly during the 2017 campaign (Sedda 2020). The *FN/RN* online supporters included a group of activists known in France as la “Fachosphère” (named after an investigative book by two French journalists) (Hobeika – Villeneuve 2017). So summarize, in France, Le Pen or Mélenchon post online much more frequently than their counterpart from mainstream parties (Kusela 2017).

Content-wise, an analysis of all FB posts by *FN/RN* party and comments by supporters during nine years found that in terms of populist features, it was the cult of personality that was the defining feature of *FN/RN* on FB. It was also this feature that distinguished the *FN/RN* from the mainstream parties in France. In fact, the *FN/RN* coupled the personality cult around Marine Le Pen with nationalism. When it comes to other populist themes such as peoples’ centrism or anti-Europeanism, these topics were not at the center of *FN/RN* communications (Stockemer 2019). A content analysis of posts (press releases) on the party’s FB from 2013 to 2015 showed that Marine Le Pen has changed the *FN/RN* in two ways. First, she has rendered the party’s discourse more populist and second, she has managed to reframe the party’s leitmotif of immigration (Stockemer – Barisione 2017). This can be seen as a sign of the party’s strategy of de-demonization.

Maurer and Diehl (2020) examined the sentiment and rhetorical targets of attack in the Twitter feeds in 2017 presidential elections. They found that Le Pen’s rhetoric was directed against the political power system as a whole. In contrast, Mélenchon avoided the French term ‘people’ and systematically replaces it by the less-charged word ‘gens’, which is more ambiguous and often carries a non-political connotation. Regarding their online strategies during 2019, Baloge and Hubé study variations in the discourse of the two parties identified in the literature as populist (Front National and La France Insoumise) during campaigning and routine periods by analyzing the Facebook posts of their two leaders (in Bennett – Lipinski – Stepinska et al. 2020). We observe that the two leaders do not use the same strategies and that the variations between the two periods highlight two different uses of populist rhetoric in addition to two ideologies that are opposed in many respects. While both refer to the people in similar proportions, none of them really tries to define in an ideological or philosophical way the people. Above all, Mélenchon criticizes more often national and international political elites, while Le Pen refers more frequently to “others” as enemies of the people.

For Jean-Luc Mélenchon, populism is the preferred style during a campaign but that has to be less used during the routine period. On the contrary, the process of “de-demonisation” of Marine Le Pen and her party is a campaign strategy: the populism is much more milder during this period. But when she’s less into the media loop, she’s much more populist in her Facebook public positions. Looking in the leaders media practices, they showed quite different media practices (Baloge – Hubé 2021). Jean-Luc Mélenchon mobilized traditional and alternative sources, while Marine Le Pen quoted, with one exception, only traditional sources, generally well established within the French journalistic field. This can be seen as a sign of the normalization strategy of the extreme right-wing party, which seeks to absolutely avoid relaying openly racist, homopho-

bic, anti-Semitic or Islamophobic sources. In the case of Marine Le Pen, we thus see a militant division of labor in terms of the radicalization of discourse confirming our hypothesis. While the FN/NR leader euphemistically supported her communication strategy on mainstream sites, her supporters invested in FB groups where much more radical statements can be made (Hobeika – Villeneuve 2017, Villeneuve 2020), frequently going beyond the limits of freedom of expression by making racist, anti-Semitic and Islamophobic statements. As mentioned before, it is therefore surprising to note that Marine Le Pen never relayed extreme-rights websites (*Égalité et Réconciliation*, *Français de Souche*, *Le Salon beige* or *Boulevard Voltaire*) which are part of her party constellation (Hobeika – Villeneuve 2017). These differences in terms of strategies and use of social networks are a continuation of two different partisan histories.

The two parties' historical and ideological roots

The two parties studied in this article have very different political heritage. The Front National has typical extreme-right roots, anchored in anti-Semitic, anti-communist, xenophobic, ultra-conservative and/or fascist traditions, but managed to move “from pariah to republican democratic contender” (Mondon 2014). Founded in 1972 by partisans of the extreme-right movement, partisans of a new fascist “national revolution” and a New Order (*Ordre nouveau*), and some other anti-Gaullist conservatives, within a few years the party was led by Jean-Marie Le Pen, former MP during the Poujade Momentum and called *Front National pour un ordre nouveau*. But the party had to wait until the 1980s to earn its first electoral success. Le Pen had succeeded in throwing the hard-core neo-fascist elements out of the party in 1978 in order to transform the Front National into an electoral machine (Dezé 2012, Igounet 2014). The party benefited from the context of the 1980s: the election of France’s first socialist President, François Mitterrand, the economic crisis, and the neo-liberal slant of the French right-wing parties, including a “tax hate” in the policy agenda as the FN had done some years previously, etc. During the 1983 local elections, Le Pen won 11.3% in Paris, and the joint RPR-FN list managed to win the Parisian suburb of Dreux. In 1986, the party entered the National Assembly after the introduction of the proportional vote and featured a large group of 35 MPs. Party strategy then tried to build coalitions with the conservative parties (RPR and UDF). During the 1988 legislative election and the 1992 and 1998 regional elections, the conservatives accepted the FN, made coalition lists and/or won certain Regions with the support of FN regional MPs. In exchange for this support, FN MPs were made vice-presidents in some regions. This was the case in Haute-Normandie and Franche-Comté (in 1992, for example). It was the first step in the long process of “de-demonization” that ended with the 1998 split in the party and the 2002 elections. The party has followed this strategy again in recent years. In 2011, in preparation for the 2012 elections, Jean-Marie Le Pen (83 years old) made room for his second daughter, Marine. With the help of young public relations employees and technocrats, using polls and working on discourse, she succeeded in framing her arrival as the sign of the party’s “normalization” and “respectability” (Mondon 2014), even though she was still a hard-liner (Dezé 2015). In 2013, the FN reached a membership of 73,000. Being in the FN seemed to open new windows of political opportunity. As Sylvain Crépon and

Nicolas Lebourg point out, “the FN constitutes [...] a formidable tool for social promotion for those members who agree to be invested in local elections” (Crépon – Lebourg 2015). Following the same de-demonization rationale, the party changed its name in 2018 to become the National Rally. Due to the peculiarities of the French electoral system, the party only counts a few elected members: in 2019, 20 MEPs, 6 MPs, 1 Senator and 28 mayors (and only 3 mayors in cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants).

The story of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his party is very different, with its starting point the left wing of the mainstream Socialist Party (PS). Jean-Luc Mélenchon is a (mainstream) political professional. After being a Marxist and Trotskyist activist in the 1970s, he joined the Socialist Party in 1976 and quickly became chief political affairs officer of a socialist mayor, in Massy, a town located 15 kilometers from Paris. Fascinated by François Mitterrand, he was an active member of the party. In 1986, at the age of 35, he became the youngest French Senator. In 1992, along with some other quadragenarians, he created “The Socialist Left” movement within the PS. He appealed to the electorate to vote for the Maastricht treaty in 1992. In 2000, he became Minister of Vocational Education in Jospin’s socialist, green, and communist government. In 2002, the defeat of Lionel Jospin by Jean-Marie Le Pen was a shock for him (Poulet 2019, p.171). His analysis was that the PS should be more leftist. In 2005, he was a partisan of the No vote for the European constitutional treaty, but remained in the party, working on Ségolène Royal’s campaign in 2007. However, after this second defeat, he left the party in 2008 with other socialists to found a new left-wing party (Parti de gauche, PG), inspired by the German example of Oscar Lafontaine’s Die Linke in 2007. The PG formed an alliance with the communist party and another small leftist party to make a coalition, the Left Front (Front de Gauche – FdG), under whose banner Mélenchon participated in the Presidential elections in 2012 and in the 2009 and 2014 European Parliament elections. After the 2012 results, he radicalized his discourse with more provocative populist tones, inspired by Podemos, Syriza and Bernie Sanders (Castaño 2018). In 2016, La France Insoumise (Indomitable France) was created as an eco-socialist movement, an electoral machine based on a horizontal hierarchy – it is a movement, not a party. In 2019, the party had 17 MPs, 2 Senators and 5 MEPs.

Looking only at the historical and ideological roots of the two parties, it is clear that they do not belong to the same political family. But seen from the viewpoint of the leader’s strategy, both use a typical pattern of populism constructed around the leader (Weyland 2001 and 2017), presenting him or her as the saviour of polity. The history of the FN/RN is closely bound to the Le Pen family. In many ways it can be considered as a political enterprise with the characteristics of a hereditary monarchy, also embodied by Marine Le Pen’s niece and former party deputy, Marion Maréchal Le Pen. As Sylvain Crépon and Nicolas Lebourg point out, “the omnipotence of the leader, defined by the party’s statutes, means that anyone seeking to influence the party’s machinery must have a direct line to its leader. There are no recognized trends within the FN, where contradictory debates are almost non-existent” (Crépon – Lebourg 2015, 446). The LFI is also the product of a political enterprise in which Jean-Luc Mélenchon plays the central role, alongside elected officials who, like him, have chosen to leave the Socialist Party. However, this question of the “leader” is not specific to parties claiming to be or categorizing themselves as populist. The Fifth French Republic, characterized by hyper-presidentialism and

a solitary exercise of power (François 2010), has been marked since General de Gaulle by the figure of the providential man, the political leader, and this is true of all parties, including those who propose a more parliamentary Sixth Republic, such as the LFI. Moreover, French political media coverage shows that France has one of the highest levels of personalization in the Western world (Van Aelst et al. 2017).

These results are also reflected in an analysis of the manifestos during the 2012, 2017 and 2019 elections shows that counter-intuitively, the party that most often appealed to the people in its programs was Jean-Luc Mélenchon's party (Baloge – Hubé 2019). The way they invoked the people was, however, quite different. In Mélenchon's manifesto, the people were mentioned as the embodiment of popular sovereignty, often backed by forms of direct deliberation, whereas, for Marine le Pen, the people were often concerned by the national and nationalist question. At the same time, both parties rejected the elites. Looking at these arguments for the people and against the elite, it can be said that these parties have a common ideological faith (Stanley 2008). But the way they use it in no way explains their positions. Historical roots still structure party discourse towards the two groups (social classes and migrants) in a classical left-right divide. Jean-Luc Mélenchon strives to defend the “working classes” and the “employees”, while Marine Le Pen worries about the “impoverishment of the middle classes and working classes” (2017) and fiscal policies for SMEs (5 proposals out of 144 in 2017). Ultimately, the parties differ, with an inclusionary populism (Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, Font – Graziano – Tsakatika 2021) defended by Jean-Luc Mélenchon and classical far-right arguments painted as populism by Marine Le Pen (Surel 2019, Daigle – Neulen – Hofeman 2019).

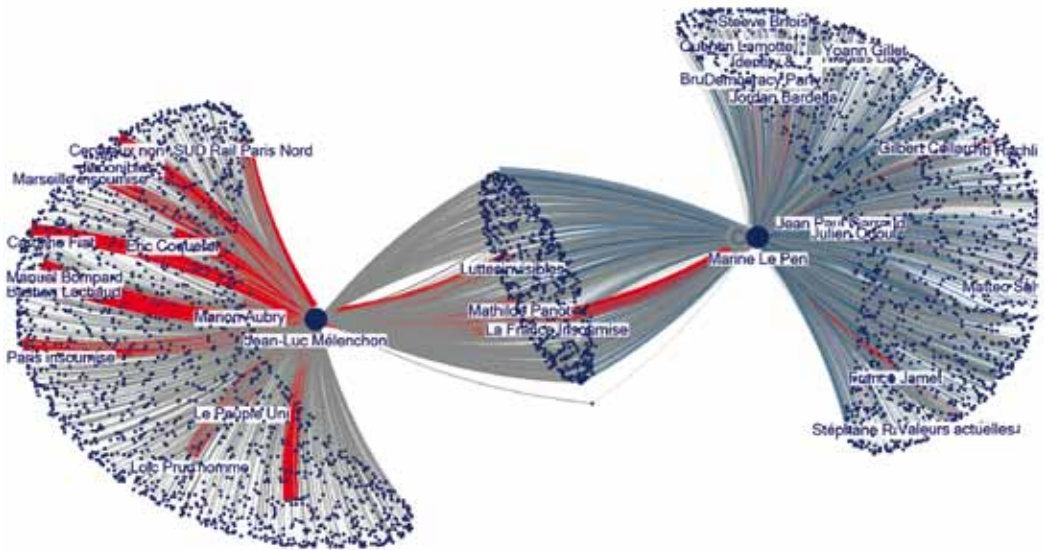
Network analysis of sources that share populist leaders' posts²

We examined here several aspects. First, whether there were disproportions between the two networks (ex. one much bigger than the other). Second, network reciprocity – the degree of inter-connection between different pages. Third, the degree of centrality, meaning of overlap between the two networks. Finally, we were interested to learn what pages were the connectors between the two, and if there was reciprocal sharing. This aspect is important, since for Marine Le Pen, 40 percent of her likes on FB originated outside France in 2017 presidential election campaign. Analysis of the networks of the two populist leaders revealed that their networks are very different and unrelated, confirming that both parties aren't similar. The analysis of reciprocity thus showed that the two leaders had similar communication strategies, since they both had reciprocal networks with mainly elected officials and political organizations, and at the same time their networks were very different, since these officials and organizations were almost never the same, as shown in the two graphs below:

On each side of the graph appear central personalities of the *FN/RN* and the *LFI*. The main difference between the two parties was that Jean-Luc Mélenchon was part of reciprocal networks

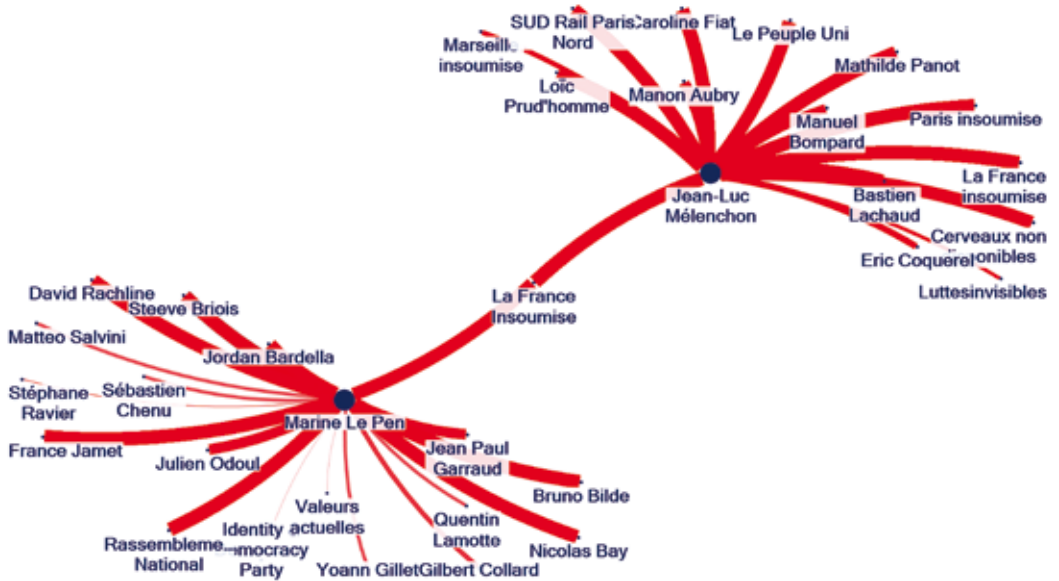
² The analysis was carried out on Facebook data (Mancuso et al., 2020; Marincea, 2020), downloaded with the Crowd-Tangle API developed by Facebook (CrowdTangle Team, 2020)

Chart 1: Facebook Populist Network in France



Source: Marinca, 2020

Chart 2: Populist Pages' Reciprocity Network



Source: Marinca, 2020

leaving more room for organizations. This was the case of “*Marseille Insoumise*” and “*Paris Insoumise*”, two local branches of the party, “*Sud Rail*”, a trade union, and “*Cerveaux Indisponibles*”, “*Luttes invisibles*” and “*le peuple uni*”; online protest groups. This result illustrates well the strategy of Mélenchon to create a movement against the left traditional parties; Marine Le Pen referred reciprocally only to her party, the FN/NR, *Identity and Democracy*, a political group in the European Parliament, and *Valeurs Actuelles*, an extreme right-wing newspaper.

As mentioned before, it should be noted that the two political leaders also very frequently referred to similar sources, mainly traditional media well established in the French media landscape: *Libération*, *Le Monde*, *20 Minutes*, *France Info*. It was only on this point that the media practices of the two elected officials came together: both shared sources that criticized the government’s actions. For example, on February 29, 2020, they both shared an article in the free of charge newspaper *20 Minutes* about the use of article 49.3 of the constitution and the motion of censure launched by the left and the right. Earlier in the year, on January 16, 2020, they both shared an article on the *France Info* website, dealing with the municipal elections and how a circular could favour the results of Emmanuel Macron’s party. Finally, on several occasions, they quoted the same article from *Le Monde* about the resignation of Jean-Paul Delevoye, the High Commissioner for Pensions in the Government of Edouard Philippe, after a series of revelations targeting him (suspicions of conflicts of interest, cumulation of activities forbidden).

The analysis of the FB pages sharing each leader more than ten times showed that here too, two very different networks could be observed. 297 FB pages shared 15,960 posts by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. This was much more than in the case of Marine Le Pen who had 187 FB pages sharing 7,540 posts of Marine Le Pen. An even more precise analysis showed that only 20 FB pages shared both Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon at least 10 times each, but in very different proportions (718 posts for the former, 2,995 for the latter), as shown in the graph below:

FB Pages that shared more than 10 times the posts of each leader had very specific profiles. A large proportion of them claimed to belong to the *Yellow Vests* movement, a critical social move-

Chart 3: Pages sharing both Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon at least 10 times each



Source: Marincea, 2020

ment against Emmanuel Macron, affiliated with no official organization. Instead, these two leaders sought to present themselves as the best representative of this unorganised movement. The table below identifies and then quantifies the FB pages shared more than 10 times by the two leaders. We have distributed these pages into five categories: page affiliated with *LFI*; page supporting or close to the *FN/RN*; *Yellow Vests* Support Page; groups opposed to Emmanuel Macron; and finally – *Other* (ex. website proposing famous historical, intellectual and funny quotes).

Table 2: More frequently shared posts

Most central (shared both pages at least 10 times each)	Shared Mélenchon	Shared Le Pen
Page affiliated with LFI		
INSOUMIS	820	10
Page affiliated with the RN		
Mes deux mains dans ta gueule tu les veux ?	11	30
Groupe Défense France Liberté .	10	29
Yellow Vests pages		
François Boulo porte-parole officiel ?	135	30
Avec François Boulo	101	18
Info gilet jaune	98	34
Gilet Jaune „ Natacha Polony“	94	18
La FRANCE en COLÈRE – Les GILETS JAUNES ont la parole....	48	21
Gilet Jaune En Direct	35	11
Gilet Jaune Le 17 Novembre	24	16
Je suis Gilet Jaune !	14	14
Gilets Jaunes, la colère du Peuple	10	29
Groups opposed to Emmanuel Macron		
La France en colère – Carte des rassemblements	719	153
Pour la démission d'Emmanuel Macron	54	34
TOUS UNIS CONTRE MACRON	41	25
ANTI MACRON	29	19
RETRAITES EN COLERE	28	15
Les français contre Macron	27	38
Other		
Citations Du Jour	162	33

Source: Own compilation

We can observe that some groups of *Yellow Vests* are almost in a balance between the two leaders. But in the majority of cases, the centrality of the two pages seems unbalanced, once again testifying to two very distinct networks, confirming that we are dealing with two political families with little in common in their communication and relationship strategies.

An interesting result here is the attempt to capture the movement of the *Yellow Vests*. This movement claims independence from traditional political parties. Its protest dimension and opposition to the government of Edouard Philippe and Emmanuel Macron has however made it a target for many parties. The studies and surveys available on the political preferences of *Yellow Vests* do not make it possible to decide which figure from the opposition is preferred by individuals close to this movement. Political science research, carried out by questionnaire during popular protests, showed a greater identification of participants with the left (44% against 15% for the right, 52% with no affiliation to the right nor the left) (Bedock et al. 2019). Conversely, surveys (conducted among supporters and not participants) revealed a more frequent *RN* vote (44% against 12% for the *LFI*). The network analysis of each party allows us to note at the very least that Jean-Luc Mélenchon was more active on the internet and social networks than Marine Le Pen in the desire to be the spokesperson of this mobilization, without however having succeeded in embodying and gathering in any name, in a consequent way, those who identify with this movement. But a specific study on the *Yellow Vests* galaxy is needed.

Discussion

The networks formed by the two populist leaders faithfully reflected their ideological orientation. Each one thus maintained relations with close elected officials or members of his or her party, while excluding his/her opponent. From this point of view, network analysis confirms the very great impermeability of the two types of populism observable in France. It is also noteworthy that Jean-Luc Mélenchon invested much more in social networks and maintained a denser network than his far-right opponent. An unexpected result therefore lies in the frequency with which Marine Le Pen referred to traditional media, whereas his opponent more often mobilized alternative sources, whose owners are less easily identifiable. Thus, in the case of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the proximity to a range of alternative sources confirms his negative attitude to the traditional media. Reviews such as “*Frustration La Revue*”, “*le bon sens*”, “*Mémoire des luttes*”, “*Lundi AM*”, “*Investig’Action*” or even “*Osons Causer*”, testify to the variety of leftist sources mobilized by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, in parallel with more classical media. These media can be qualified as alternative, due to the fact that they are generally not registered in the official register of French media, by an online presence and by hybrid forms of journalism, at the crossroads of information and activism.

Our study therefore confirms our initial hypothesis: the *RN/FN* and *LFI* thus extend their ideological, historical and communicational differences online. Such differences raise questions about the relevance of the populist category to describe two parties that are opposed on many points. Further work may confirm these initial observations. In particular, it would be interesting to study the militant galaxies of the two parties, following on from the work of Fabienne Greffet (2020, see also Gibson – Greffet – Cantijoch 2017), by proposing a network analysis focusing

on online interactions. Finally, this network analysis tells us something about the communicative strategies of the two leaders but tells us relatively little about the elaboration of these strategies. Interviews with the two leaders and their communication teams would help us understand what is a political opportunity strategy and what is a transformation of political ideologies.

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